

WELCOME 29 March 2020 – 5 Lent '20 A

DEEP CYCLE: DEEP LIFE

John 11:1-44

Good morning & Welcome to Living Water Fellowship! Welcome to the new liturgical season...The Season of COVID-19. There's all sorts of new liturgical rules for this season...most of 'em have to do with keeping your distance & washing your hands! We'll figure it out as we go!

Over the last weeks we've noted two simple truths:

1. Knowing something is different from wisdom
2. Being able to see is different from vision

It is also true...Being alive is different from having LIFE...

Boy do we know what that's like! Being upright & taking nourishment is a great place to start...but there's huge parts of life that get left out if that's all you have...if you're social distancing or self-isolating...can't find toilet paper!

But we are uniquely & richly blessed... in Jesus Christ we've been given wisdom, vision and abundant full life that not even contagion, pestilence or death can destroy. Jesus offers us a DEEP LIFE where death doesn't have the last word; where resurrection and life forever is real and available to all.

Today Jesus invites us not only to receive deep life, but to be part of the miracle of bringing that life to a world in need of hope like never before.

We'll explore & experience that together today as again Jesus comes in the power of his Spirit to plant his love within us & to live through all we are & do.

Let's pray & then we'll get stuck into it!

PRAYER OF THE DAY

Holy God, Creator of Life, call us out of our dark places & give us the grace of new life. When we see nothing but hopelessness, surprise us with the breath of your spirit.

Call us out of our complacency and routines, set us free from our self-imposed bonds, and fill us with your spirit of life, compassion, and peace. Take all that we are & use us for your glory... In the name of Jesus, your Anointed One, we pray. Amen!

5 Lent '20 A - DEEP CYCLE: DEEP LIFE

John 11:1-44

My first long-term regular job was as a delivery boy. I took oilfield data in hard copy from Cambe Geological Services data library, where I worked, to oil companies' & geologists' offices all over downtown Houston, TX.

Although I grew up there, it was my 1st real daily experience in the hustle/bustle of a big city & it was my 1st experience *AT ALL* w/ homelessness. Like any major metro area, downtown Houston was home to the homeless. I used to have to navigate their lives as best I could to get from one office to another & back for my next set of delivery in the course of my work day. We often had to move them on from around our building...some would sleep in the alcove near our back door...or chase them out of our big company skip bin...it was safe & dry most nights & there were 1-2 who had to be woken & sent on their way...You could always tell, once you knew, when there was someone in the skip bin. No matter what else was in there... You could smell the homelessness.

If I'd known then what I know now I would have known that it wasn't just the lack of proper hygiene bathing/toileting, old cigarette smoke or last night's booze I smelled. What I smelled was death...it was wrapped in the scent of poverty & fear, clothed in the odor of mental illness & addiction, swathed in the aromas of despair loneliness sickness hopelessness. What I smelled was death...they were dead men & women walking & sleeping on the sidewalks in the skip bins & living under the bridges & in the back alleys of my hometown.

Maybe you've smelled death lately...Oh...not literal decaying flesh, or some homeless guy behind your back fence, but fear, uncertainty, worry & anger as drought & fire then virus pressed in like the fever pressed in on Lazarus. Maybe you smelled it when you realized that no matter what else happened there'd be less income & more loss more isolation more worry...for a while...maybe a long while. You might have smelled it around a divorce when a relationship or a family died. Maybe you were in the Dr's office when that lady in the waiting room across from you came out from seeing the Dr crying. It's everywhere...

Wednesday I popped into one of my adjunct offices...local coffee shop...no tables, 3 chairs, no sofa & nobody sitting around eating lunch & enjoying their coffee like usual. No noise. No hum & buzz like usual. None of the regular faces. Owner had already reduced his midday staff from 5 to 3...He looked awful. Just robotic coffee making. No small talk. No smiles. I told him my heart broke for him & his crew & I'd be praying for them... He said "You should see it from this side of the counter." Smelled like death. Like Mary & Martha when their brother went from well to sick & from sick to bed to worse to barely hanging on...My barista buddy knows what death smells/looks like when it's stalking its next victim.

Part of the historic atmosphere of the season we call Lent is about acknowledging that fact: *"Remember you are dust & to dust you shall return."* That's where Lent begins With ashes...that reminder of our mortality & sin-induced brokenness ending in death. For some of us that day is closer than it has ever been but for all of us that day is closer than it was yesterday. We hate that...the very idea that death stalks us like it did Lazarus...In spite of his family's devoted care... the best medical help... countless prayers...combined love of friends & community, Lazarus gets worse not better & then he dies. Sometimes the sick don't get better. In this world death takes us all.

That part we know because we've seen it before. We know what it's like to be Martha/Mary. To know you are fighting an uphill battle...you are outmatched...the frustration & fear of seeing your very best efforts go toward nothing. Lazarus is sick & his sisters send word to Jesus that this one whom Jesus loves smells like death. Now having dispatched that message I don't think they just sat there & waited. When our loved ones hurt we do stuff. You know they did the best they could. Their supreme love & care went into making their brother well...Comfortable. Cared for. They brought their very best against this sickness that had invaded their home & begun to steal their brother, attack their sense of family tranquility & threaten their lives & existence.

But there's this silence...this nothing from Jesus. And I don't understand it & neither does Mary/Martha/you...When fear & uncertainty morph into despair & hopelessness you aren't far from bitterness & anger. I've always thought Martha's 1st words to Jesus were 1-part lament & 2-parts accusation. *"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."* Who has not framed those thoughts during times of grief or tragedy? "God, where are you?" "God, you could have done something?" Jesus *"stayed where he was"* & those words alone are enough to kick me in the guts He what? "Jesus! Where the heck have you been?" Maybe you've thought that this week?

By the time Jesus shows up Laz is well & truly on his way back to dust. Dead 4 days in Jewish thinking means that even Laz's soul has left the body...there truly is nothing left to do but weep...I know the feeling...that moment when you just throw your hands up & pffft...It is over. It's too late. In the darkness of failed relationships, failed plans for happiness, failed dreams of beauty & happy endings. In the entombed hopeless reality of life's darkness. When you know there is

no path to recovery, joy, no light at the end of the tunnel...The sisters like many of us hope for Jesus to show up & flip the switch from dark to light...from death to life. We think in those either/or frameworks all the time. up/down light/dark life/death love/hate friend/foe...

But with Jesus & throughout the Bible...we see that life & death/light & dark aren't "things" that can be switched this way or that...fork in the road left/right...but are in fact opposing Kingdoms – conflicting powers – hostile forces arrayed against one another...each threatening to drive out the other. And that explains Jesus' reaction upon his arrival...*"I am the resurrection AND THE LIFE..."* Jesus declares his imminent victory while death still holds the field. Jesus announces the approaching day of triumph in the throes of defeat. Jesus proclaims the Father's ultimate will...that all the scents of death would be driven back in the aroma of life in the Son through the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus says with utmost certainty & assurance: In him Sin is vanquished. Death is defeated. Evil is overcome. Hell is overthrown. The entire kingdom of darkness & death beaten by his deep eternal life.

And you can hear the sounds of this early skirmish... Verses 33, 35, & 38: ³³When Jesus saw her weeping & saw the other people weeping with her, a deep anger welled up within him, & he was deeply troubled...³⁵Then Jesus wept...³⁸Jesus was still angry as he arrived at the tomb, a cave with a stone rolled across its entrance The underlined words in the Greek are words often used to describe an enraged animal snorting frothing growling prior to an attack. Why's that?

Well...too often we see this & catch only a glimpse of Jesus' humanity – that he too grieves in the face of a loved one's death. Yes that's true (vs 35) but see what else is there. Jesus isn't just broken-hearted with sadness at his friend's grave. Jesus isn't just overcome with sympathy for the crying women. Jesus isn't just grief-stricken at the loss of another life. Jesus stands as the battle-front ^{b/t} life & death - ^{b/t} sin & forgiveness – ^{b/t} the life God intends & this world taken hostage by the evil one...

Jesus is fully aware of the power of sin & death & evil & the cost they will exact before he can free us, his brothers & sisters, from their grip. Deep ^{w/in} Jesus the price he will pay, the suffering he will endure, the death he will experience for you & for me are given voice in a groaning/growling/anger that will only be fully vented through his death & resurrection...the cross & empty tomb. Some of the signs Jesus accomplishes & the miracles he performs seem almost back of the hand causal... but standing in the face of death at the door of the tomb there is no such relaxed atmosphere...In the face of pain, sorrow, grief, & death – at the door of the tomb – Jesus stakes his claim as Lord of life who will not allow death the last word. In the face of pain, sorrow, grief, & death – at the door of the tomb – Jesus stakes his claim as Lord of life who will not allow death to win forever.

And yes...Jesus wept. He is moved by our plight. He is saddened by our sadness. Jesus, the *word made flesh*, shares our life fully/completely: including our tears. When you are in that place when you have nothing left but tears...you have his along with yours. When you are in the place of weeping you have his along with yours. When you are in that place...you have Jesus. *Because God's children are human beings—made of flesh and blood—the Son also became flesh and blood...Since he himself has gone through suffering and testing, he is able to help us...* Heb. 2:14, 17 When you are in that place...you have Jesus.

In John's gospel Jesus performs 7 signs that reveal him as the promised Messiah. 1st is changing water to wine at a wedding & the last is this resuscitation of Lazarus at a funeral. At our highest at our lowest at our most intimate...Jesus comes to claim us & bring life to us by his power & grace. This isn't just about making sure Lazarus enjoys his next birthday, but that everyone will know that *"Lazarus! Come out!"* is a command that creates that which was not & draws us into the knowledge & hope of those who follow the crucified & risen one: When pressed to the edge, when faced with the absolute end of all that we have known or can imagine, surrounded & isolated by a foe we perhaps can't see clearly or understand fully...we stand fully secure in the power & mercy of God who commands Lazarus & in due course each of us to come forth. The responsibility for life -- creating it in the first place & recreating it once again -- is wholly God's. Life – giving it - sustaining it – restoring it to its fullness & seeing it to completion are solely the business of God the Father.

My people, I will open your graves and take you out of them. – Ez 37:12 It's easy, like Martha did...to trust that promise for some far off day...But it is especially a promise for to-day...it is today's gift & today's power...for you & for me. *"Unwrap him & let him go!"* The community of those who follow Jesus are called to get into the action. The community of those who know that Christ brings life to the dead, who know the eventual triumph of his life over sin, death & evil, who know the power of his Spirit unleashed in his people are given that power to proclaim hope into hopelessness – joy into despair – peace into the place of turmoil – forgiveness into broken relationships – and Christ's love into all places. .

Let's pray: **Lord Jesus call me into life & into the work of bringing life to others. Open me to your power & presence for the sake of someone I meet this week. Let your life and love rule in me. I pray right now for...**(*silent prayer for those living distant from God's grace*) **In your name I pray... Amen**

BLESSING/SENDING

Come out! Jesus commands, as he calls us from the tombs of our existence into the brightness of a new day.

Come out! Jesus cries, and unbinds us from the chains of sin, death & evil

Come out! Jesus calls, and releases us into his world to be his life, his breath, & his spirit for all who linger in darkness & the shadow of death. AMEN